

THE HOLOCAUST AND THE DISCOURSE OF CHILDHOOD: DAVID GROSSMAN'S *SEE UNDER: LOVE*¹

by

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Treatments of the Holocaust in imaginative literature share and pose a fundamental dilemma: how to assimilate the unimaginable into the imagination; how to find a language commensurate with the enormity of events that transpired in the Shoah. That these are difficulties to be reckoned with has become an axiomatic tenet of criticism dealing with literary responses to disaster. Less attention, though, has been paid to another phenomenon: the number of novels which devise an approach to the subject by adopting a child's point of view and limited perception of historical events. In such works as Aharon Appelfeld's *The Age of Wonders*, Uri Orlev's *The Lead Soldiers*, Ilse Aichinger's *Herod's Children*, and to some extent Elie Wiesel's *Night* or André Swartz-Bart's *The Last of the Just*, focus on a child's partial understanding helps alleviate the adult narrator's struggle with language and artistic expression, for the young character's incomprehension serves to indicate the incomprehensibility of the catastrophe.²

1. A portion of this paper was prepared for a presentation at the 1987 MLA Convention, as part of a panel on "*Infans*: Representing the Language of the Child." My thanks to Mark Heberle, organizer of the session, for his helpful formulation of significant literary issues to be addressed in connection with child language. In addition, I would like to express appreciation to the Jewish Studies Program at the University of Washington, for helping to fund the research for this essay.

2. A number of studies have commented on these works individually, but none has discussed them collectively or explored childhood perspectives and voices as a general phenomenon prevalent in literary treatments of the Holocaust. Langer (1975) discusses Aichinger's novel (p. 124-65); Shaked (1970) offers useful remarks on *The Lead Soldiers* (p. 82-86); Mintz' perceptive analysis of Appelfeld in *Hurban* (1984, p. 203-38) touches on children characters in the author's early fiction and mentions *The Age of Wonders* tangentially. Ezrahi (1980) briefly discusses childhood and the Holocaust, but primarily in relation to Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, a text which raises rather different questions than the ones addressed here. Yaoz (1980) provides some bibliography of reviews received by

David Grossman's *ʿAyyēn ʿerek ʔahābāh* (*See Under: Love*) similarly cultivates a depiction of childhood to speak of unspeakable horror. Unlike those other writers, however, who concentrate on suffering during the Nazi era and who often draw on their own tormented memories from that time, Grossman creates a child protagonist born, like himself, after World War II, who attempts to fathom what Nazism was. The boy's parents are survivors of Hitler's camps and reticent to speak of their experience. Consequently, the son must combat incomprehension at two levels: first he must contend with the family silence and then try to grapple emotionally and intellectually with the sheer ghastliness of what he learns. Featured in the first of four segments that comprise the novel, this protagonist is a nine-year-old boy named Momik, who lives with his parents in Jerusalem. The events of the story take place in 1959, and they begin to unfold as an ambulance arrives, without previous notice, bringing the family an elderly relative. The invalid, Anshel Wasserman, has been emotionally and mentally crippled from abuse at the hands of the Nazis. Unable to communicate with those around him, condemned to an inner world of horror from which he cannot escape, he mumbles continually to himself. Since his arrival in Israel he has been living, unidentified, in a nursing home, and it is only now that the authorities at long last have succeeded in locating his surviving relations. Though Momik's parents agree to take the old man in, they are determined to shield their little boy and try not to upset him with the truth of his adoptive grandfather's past. These circumstances arouse the child's curiosity and he feels driven to discover all he can about the new member of the household and the secret world the grown-ups share.

Upon its appearance in 1986, *See Under: Love* caused a sensation on the Israeli literary scene. Each of its four sections, in complex and highly diverse ways, attempts an innovative treatment of Holocaust themes. Chapter I in particular received wide critical acclaim. Part of the significance of this text is that it deals with the second generation to the Holocaust—a topic not yet developed in Hebrew fiction and one only beginning to emerge in other Jewish literatures. This portion of the novel, which can be read effectively as a self-contained unit of narrative, is also remarkable for its engagement with a child's inner life. For all these reasons this work deserves careful analysis. A consideration of

Orlev and Appelfeld. In a related but distinct area of inquiry which does not so explicitly concern the representation of consciousness in fiction, several studies have pointed out a pervasive preoccupation in Hebrew literature with returning to the past, after the Holocaust, to reckon with loss and lost childhood. See, for instance, Alter (1969), Shaked (1970), and Alexander (1979).

complementary formal and thematic tensions in the initial segment of *See Under: Love* is in order, moreover, as Part I serves an important function in prefacing or setting the stage for subsequent chapters of the novel.

The representation of children's consciousness in fiction is always problematical, for no adult writer can speak authentically in a child's voice. Unavoidably, disparities remain between child characters and adult narrators, resulting in a duality of narrative stance. Difficulties arise, moreover, not only because the views and perceptions of childhood by necessity remain to some degree irrecoverable; in addition, the language of children may not be interesting as narrative discourse. To the extent that a writer could approximate a child's voice, there would still ensue a struggle with essentially incompatible possibilities: making the language of the text mimetically genuine and making it rhetorically significant. For the same reason, though, precisely because this narrative strategy engenders complexities, it is often suited to the purposes of fiction concerning the Holocaust. Mediating between two perspectives allows the author to forestall disclosure of overly horrifying fact, yet make omnipresent for the reader an awareness of bitter realities. In *Ayyen ērek* these realities constitute the indispensable background without which the little boy's process of discovery would not make sense. Grossman's accomplishment lies in the variety of means he uses to strike a felicitous balance between the opposing forces inherent in his narrative situation. Playing adult and child aspects of the text off against one another, he also synthesizes them into an artistic whole with an integrity of its own.

One fundamental way this novel approaches child discourse is through the deployment of psychonarration and narrated monologue. These are the terms Dorrit Cohn (1978) uses to classify, first of all, accounts of a character's inner life by an authorial voice and, secondly, the rendering of a character's thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third person reference and basic tense of narration.³ In *See Under: Love* these

3. The intricate complexities of narrated monologue have given rise to considerable theoretical debate. Cohn situates her own discussion against the context of previous work and explains differences between her nomenclature and *style indirect libre* or *Erlebte Rede*. Other consideration of the subtleties of associated modes of narration, their relation to the concept of mimesis, and the development of pertinent critical terminology has been pursued by such critics as Ann Banfield, Mieke Bal, Gerard Genette, Moshe Ron, and Roy Pascal. For detailed relevant bibliography and a concise, highly condensed survey, see Rimmon-Kenan (1983).

techniques allow Grossman to maintain the child's perspective and also the organizational control of a mature narrator. Focalization is restricted to Momik's thoughts and perceptions; it is the child's experience that orients the story, but the text is far more articulate than any version of events a nine-year-old could either recount to an audience or sustain internally to himself. Therefore, while the work clearly depends on a grown-up artist who provides the point from which all is retrospective and makes the tale tellable, voice here shifts and glides between that of the implied narrator and that of the protagonist. Through varied kinds of speech representation, the narrative gains flexibility in offering differing degrees of penetration into the child's consciousness. Conveying thoughts more inchoate than rational verbalization, the text also records thoughts informed by language and reports words clearly registered in Momik's mind as they have been spoken by the boy himself or by others.

In the following scene, for instance, as Momik watches his parents eat, several levels of narrative voice put into evidence several degrees of inwardness in the boy's thinking:

[1] Dinner.

[2] It goes like this: first Mother and Momik quickly arrange the table, and Mother warms up the big pots from the fridge and then brings the dishes. [3] This is when the danger begins. [4] Mother and Father eat with all their strength. [5] They begin to sweat and then their eyes begin to bulge. [6] Momik pretends to eat but all the while watches them carefully and wonders how such a fat woman as his mother could have come out of Grandma Henny and how a scarecrow of a kid like himself could have come out of the two of them. [7] He tastes just a little on the end of his fork, but the food sticks in his throat from all the tension, and that's how it is. [8] His parents have to eat lots of food every night in order to be strong. Once already they managed to escape from death, but the second time, for sure, it wouldn't let them go. (p. 46)⁴

Though the parents never divulge details of their past, the son is highly aware of the fear and terrible memories of hunger that torment them even now. The first two sentences present events as Momik sees them, but which he doesn't necessarily articulate. Representing something between reflective and non-reflective consciousness, these lines may be designated as "narrated perception." The prose is tinged with verbal patterns and colloquialisms that might be ascribed to a child, and such

4. Translations of *Ayyēn ʿerek ʾahābāh* in this paper are my own; pages cited refer to the location of the passage in the original Hebrew.

"stylistic contagion" helps create consonant psychonarration—that is, a closeness between author and fictional figure.⁵ The second, third, and fourth sentences introduce more distinct dissonance; the word "danger" decidedly belongs to the vocabulary of the authorial voice, but signals observations peculiar to the boy's domain. The internal contradiction sets off ironic resonance. From the adult view "danger" is an exaggeration or misnomer. This perspective casts the parents' eating habits as abnormal or damaged behavior determined by the trauma of the war. Because of such words as "bulge" and "sweat" the actions of the mother and father seem pathetic or comically grotesque. For the boy, nonetheless, the concept implied by the word "danger" is apt. The son sees the scene in an idealized way and he elevates the same actions into the terms of the ongoing struggle (indicated by the phrase "all their strength"). Within this framework bulging and sweating take on a different connotation as titanic effort.

That Momik inscribes his parents in a heroic code is made more explicit in the last two sentences of the passage. It is not the mature narrator who suggests that overeating builds strength and staves off death. Instead, it is the child who sees the meal as part of a fateful battle. The narrated monologue used to convey this opinion employs words which could be entirely the boy's except for the personal pronouns, and the preceding line (#6, "he wonders," *hû hōšēb*) has prepared the reader for just such a shift orienting the passage to the child's utterances. As the indirect discourse presents a summary of Momik's thoughts, it provides a minimal but perceptible transition which signals that the boy is struggling to crystallize, perhaps put into words, his awareness of the situation. By line 8 the reader can accept the final pronouncements as Momik's evaluation of affairs, and at the same time the prose evades forcing the issue of whether or not a child would actually pronounce such a sentence to himself. The effect of the final line therefore is to make Momik's voice more pronounced and independent, while also assuring that the actual text will fall short of direct quotation.⁶ Because the boy's words are retained within the voice of the narrator, his thoughts cannot be dismissed readily as childish prattle; the presentation

5. Also Cohn's terminology.

6. As Cohn remarks, "By leaving the relationship between words and thoughts latent, the narrated monologue casts a peculiarly penumbral light on the figural consciousness, suspending it on the threshold of verbalization in a manner that cannot be achieved by direct quotation. This ambiguity is unquestionably one reason why so many writers prefer the less direct technique" (p. 103). This ambiguity is also a particularly important factor in the adaptability of narrated monologue to the depiction of a child's inner life.

of a child's view within the cogent narrative of someone older imputes seriousness to the character's inner world. As a result, the conclusion Momik reaches may be inadequate or comically distorted, i.e., his innocence may raise smiles, but the passage insists on the impressive sensitivity and complexity of his mental life. Momik, in short, has discovered a profound truth: that his parents are perpetually engaged in a conflict of monumental proportions. The tensions that drive them are phantasmatic but undeniably compelling, and, as the parents' compulsions strenuously resist being judged by the standard social norms of ordinary times, Momik's interpretation is at once misguided and somehow appropriate, eerily in accord with the intensity of the parents' suffering. A double-edged irony emerges, created through the superimposition of voices that allows the narrator to exercise both distance from and identification with the character.

Because this bivocality so effectively shows discrepancies between adult and child views while also promoting empathy with the young character, narrated monologue is used commonly in the novel to reveal exceptional insights on the youngster's part. Momik, for instance, is responsible for helping Anshel bathe, and the boy is fascinated by the number on the old man's arm. When, despite insistent trying, he cannot wash it off with soap and water, the child speculates that the marks must be inscribed from within. As a result he is "even more sure that maybe there really was someone inside of grandpa, and maybe inside the others too, and they were calling for help that way" (p. 21). The tentativeness of these lines ("even more sure that maybe there really was") suggests a groping toward new understandings. Though the hypothesis arrived at is patently childish and silly, it expresses in a graphic and immediate way a true circumstance which grown-ups would only state more abstractly, were they willing to express it at all: i.e., the survivors are trapped in an inner life which is largely inaccessible to others.

That this narrative approach helps accord the child's voice a privileged status becomes even more evident when contrasted with those occasions when Momik does speak up within the narrated events themselves. At those times either the adults try to silence his questions and observations, or his words demonstrate the gap between the profundity of his inner life and the superficial way his parents and neighbors are prepared to understand him. At night, for example, Mother and Father come to stand by his bed. Momik pretends to be asleep, while in actuality he anticipates with dread the screams they routinely produce during their nightmares. Hoping to spare them additional pain, the son wants his parents to see him as a healthy, contented child who smiles all the time:

... sometimes he has ideas, he's a real Einstein and he says, for example, as if he were asleep, kick it to me Joey, we'll win today Danny, and other things to make them happy, and once, when it was an especially hard day [...] he sang to them as if in his sleep *etkohol od belevav pehenihima* and from all the excitement wet himself, and all this so they'd see that they don't have to worry about him at all (p. 47-48).

Momik's rendition of the *Hattiqvāh* anthem, which is convincingly childlike as it suggests scores of unreflecting rote repetitions, is perceived by the parents through their own emotional distortions as a sign of social adjustment. The reader, of course, having been privy to Momik's inner life, brings a very different knowledge of the events and can interpret his words as a sign of genuine danger: this is a child acting overly protective of his parents at the cost of his own need to be understood.

On each of these occasions the author creates the impression of smooth, continuous narrative surface. Psychonarration approaches narrated monologue and vice versa as the two incorporate into themselves varying amounts of the child character's idiolect. This quality of the prose complements and amplifies one of the peculiar properties of narrated monologue itself: as a technique of storytelling which problematizes the distinction between the narratological notions, "who sees" and "who tells," this narrative strategy discourages disentanglement of focalizations and utterances. The resulting conflation of perspectives allows subtle modulations in the direction of either child or adult discourse. Grossman's novel in this respect differs significantly from the approaches of, for example, Appelfeld and Orlev, who likewise turn to children protagonists in their treatment of the Holocaust. *The Age of Wonders* provides a grown-up narrator reminiscing directly back on his own childhood and recounting events in the first person. While maintaining the restricted scope of a youngster's understanding, the text all the same retains a decidedly grown-up voice and vocabulary. One scene, for instance, in which the action exceeds the child's cognitive grasp, is conveyed this way:

The colors of light faded. The armchairs were covered with a gray fuzz. I sensed that something was coming to a head in the silence.[...] whispered remarks were exchanged that I failed to understand. There was something dark at the heart of this affair (p. 26).

By eschewing the immediacy of quotation (the child's language) or even narrated monologue (i.e., discourse suspended between the immediacy of quotation and the mediacy of narration), Appelfeld orients his text more to an adult's angle of vision than does Grossman. Consequently,

the narrator can recount his tale with what has been called the "non-interpretive amazement" of a child, but the narrative disallows joyous naiveté (Mintz, 1984). The entire telling of the tale (*discours*) is suffused with the gravity of mourning and trauma that comes later in the narrated events (*histoire*), after the fact of innocence lost. Orlev sometimes follows a similar pattern, presenting actions through adult vocabulary while recording the fragmentary perceptions a child would entertain. At other times this author more decisively separates the child and adult dimensions of the narrative to maximize the gap between perspectives. What is genuinely a child's voice arises briefly in dialogue, but entirely adult intervention brings admonishments from the narrator. On one occasion, for instance, the protagonist witnesses a terrifying sight and the narrator cautions his audience, "Don't read your emotions into him. He wasn't at all upset. He thought this was the way things were supposed to be" (p. 101).

See Under: Love, by contrast, offers much more extensive and sustained fusion between child and adult expression. To be sure, this more ambitious attempt to integrate a child's consciousness into the prose of the novel does not constitute a dramatically innovative exploration of children's language in terms of recreating genuine syntactic patterns typical of verbal thought. Inner speech, as defined clinically by psycholinguists, is not speech minus sound, but a linguistic phenomenon displaying basic structures and functions of its own. Tending toward abbreviation and elision, it often omits articles, subject pronouns, prepositions, and copulas. Because certain things are apparent to the thinker, they needn't be spelled out in elaborate fashion and one word can often evoke a whole complex of ideas. *See Under: Love* is less daring at reproducing such language than is Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* or the work of a number of other authors.⁷ Taking advantage of narrative techniques widely familiar in many modern literatures, Grossman is more discursive and less experimental.⁸ Still, his novel is notable for its

7. For a classic discussion of inner speech from a psycholinguistic point of view, see Vygotsky (1962). Ricou (1987) has studied aspects of early language acquisition in relation to narrative representation, considering the fiction of authors who attempt to transcribe linguistic patterns and thought of very early childhood.

8. It is not surprising that many of Rimmon-Kenan's examples of ambiguous focalization and complex narrative voices involve child protagonists, e.g., in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* and "Araby," or Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Due to the endemically problematic nature of representing a child's inner life in fiction, pursuit of that goal as a matter of course encourages the development of narrative strategies which conflate perspectives and depend on bivocality.

insightful application of these approaches to the treatment of the Shoah and for the supple use of colloquial idiom in his prose. Grammatical mistakes and childish phrases deliciously capture the new Hebrew of the streets and depart from the stilted, elevated diction, at a remove from everyday exchange, which until recently has characterized Hebrew fiction. The exceptional history of Hebrew—as the holy tongue of liturgy and scripture, which in the past century has undergone extraordinary rebirth to become a modern vernacular—has exerted pressure in high-brow literature against reliance on the spoken language. Grossman's sensitivity to various registers of the language and his integration of childish, low diction into high art is a sign of Hebrew's increasing maturity as a living language and artistic medium in a modern secular literature.⁹

In addition to adopting an overall narrative stance which embeds a child's voice within the framework of an adult narrator, *See Under: Love* combines child and adult voice in another fundamental, though inverse way. As the examples till now have in effect already demonstrated, the adult world impinges on the child not at the level of narration alone, but in narrated events as well. This is a text preoccupied with a child's attempts to understand his elders, and, as Momik to varying degrees internalizes aspects of the parents' world, the embedding of adult code within the boy's thoughts augments the overlap of perspectives. While the mature narrator allows an immature voice into his text, it is the child who allows the largely suppressed grown-up reality and perspective to surface in his own discourse. He thereby grants them admittance to the forefront of the text as a whole and so to the reader's attention.

Within the framework of the child's articulate thoughts, there is notable intercalation of adult language via the boy's imitation of certain formulaic phrases. The youngster absorbs the peculiar blend of Hebrew and Yiddish used by the refugees he knows and he copies their speech patterns. Whenever Nazis are mentioned, for instance, he tags on the

9. Examples of slang abound in the novel; in the dinner scene for instance we find "beṭaḥ" and "hāmōn 'ōkel" (p. 46); at other times Momik makes childish oaths such as, "ʔap pa'am, ʔap pa'am hūṭ barzel" and expresses himself with exaggerations of typically childish formulation: Anshel is "hā'īš hākī zāqēn bā'ōlām" (p. 9) in Momik's eyes. Grammatical mistakes (particularly regarding *smichut*) also are indicative of the child's voice in this text: for instance, "haššēlōšāh hazzēqēnim hā'elleh" (p. 12).

A notable precedent in depicting a child's voice in Hebrew literature is A. B. Yehoshua's *A Late Divorce*, the first chapter of which presents the monologue of a young boy.

expression "*yimmaḥ šēmām*". Similarly, Momik calls himself an "*alter kop*", that is "old head" or wise fellow, to congratulate himself on this own intelligence and maturity. In both cases the phrases are inappropriate for a child's usage, but an accurate report of what the adults say. Again echoing his parents' and neighbors' parlance, he refers to the world of their past as *ereššām*, the land of THERE. For the grown-ups the one word, "there," overflows with significance and connotation: Momik adopts their usage naively as if they came from a country literally called THERE.

This use of mimicry in the prose offers psycholinguistic authenticity, for children are capable of repeating many things without fully comprehending them. Perception is commonly a territory staked out ahead of time by more narrowly linguistic knowledge. Momik's parroting of grown-up locutions, in particular, is plausible because he is such a bright and precocious child with an almost photographic memory. There is artistic benefit to this narrative procedure, furthermore, as it provides a window onto the adult frame of reference never directly evinced outside of Momik's vision. In this way the narrative affords the reader valuable information about the milieu and social background of the family: the parents' Eastern European roots, their bitterness toward the Nazis, and the mystery in which they shroud their past. Momik's direct citation of others also allows the introduction of substantial amounts of Yiddish into the text without making overly cumbersome use of a second language. Somewhat bilingual, but not entirely fluent in Yiddish, the child latches onto certain expressions and translates them immediately into Hebrew. At times, conversely, he plays at translating Hebrew into Yiddish. This passage, by way of illustration, is taken from the scene at the dinner table mentioned earlier:

They clean the big pots with the help of large pieces of bread. Momik swallows some saliva and his glasses get all steamed up. Mother and Father disappear and look at him again from beyond piles of pots and frying pans and their shadow dances on the wall behind them. Suddenly it seems to him that they are floating a little in the air on the hot steam from the soup and he almost shouts out in fear—God help them, he says in his heart in Hebrew and immediately translates in Yiddish so that God will understand, *mir sol sein fur deine bindelech*, for the sake of their little bones, like Mother always says about him (p. 46).

Simultaneous translations such as these make the prose understandable for that sizeable portion of the Israeli reading public which would not otherwise know enough Yiddish to follow. The author thus develops a clever device for bringing to life a mode of speech—the language of the

European refugees—never before as effectively captured in Hebrew fiction. Altogether, the integration of mature and youthful planes contributes to a successful depiction of child language, while the text also makes successful use of child language for other artistic ends.

A further meeting of adult language and child's inner world occurs when whole passages, spoken by other characters, are subsumed within Momik's thoughts. Early in the novel, for example, the boy reflects on Bella, the owner of a grocery store who is losing all her customers in a recently established supermarket:

That all her clients were leaving her didn't matter to Bella (so she said) and also that rich now she'd never be, so what, does Rockefeller eat two lunches? Does Rothschild sleep in two beds (p. 16)?

Incorporating Bella's modes of thinking and expression into his own (including syntactical interference of Yiddish in Hebrew), the character himself creates a narrated monologue within his own discourse much as the narrator conveys Momik's thoughts through narrated monologue in the more comprehensive narrative frame. The boy's internalization of adult expression fosters a not-so-covert interlingual and conceptual montage that works in the interest of representational vividness and complexity.¹⁰

The most dynamic intersection of adult and child discourse comes about with the little boy's attempt to define specific words in his own way. He wants passionately to enter into the grown-up's discourse in order to decode their secrets, so he patches together images of the war era through impressions based on overhead conversations, taciturn comments, and a variety of texts to which he assigns his own meaning. When, for instance, he hears about "the Nazi beast," *hahayyā hannašit*, he assumes that the phrase refers to some kind of animal. Subsequently, he begins to collect stray cats, birds, and other creatures to see if he can't identify the wicked one and exorcise the evil out of it. Compounding his confusion is mention in the papers and radio broadcasts about the noted Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal. Imagining Wiesenthal's home as a big

10. Meir Sternberg (1981) has devised a typology of fictional methods for rendering multilingual discourse in a medium which is normally unilingual. See *Under: Love* demonstrates a range of these techniques, including selective reproduction (intermittent, short quotation of the second language), verbal transposition (the poetic equivalent of bilingual interference), and conceptual reflection (which retains facets of the referential and semantic range of a foreign culture, though not its exact verbal expression). In this novel polylingual representation is integral to and heightens the attention to generational differences.

game hunter's trophy room, Momik determines to write to this man and engage his help in tracking the beast. At least, he figures, he might ask for some tips: Do the animals congregate in large herds? What are their eating habits? What kind of prey do they pursue? and so on. He knows, too, that his parents have been in camps, but he interprets this information in a way commensurate with his own understanding. Convinced that his father was a kind of kaiser and a war hero, he supposes that the adults he knows from THERE all lived together at a military base training for glorious exploits. Momik is puzzled by the knowledge that there were trains at the camps, but he surmises that the scene must have resembled westerns in which Indians attack the mail train and settlers defend their railroad. Adult knowledge of historical events after the fact allows the reader to appreciate with humor, irony, and compassion the child's efforts to understand. The narrative avoids excessive cuteness because Momik's inner life is at once engagingly imaginative, intelligent, and childlike, and because this character makes such an earnest effort to come to terms with a phenomenon the reader knows to be terrifying. The distance between child character and adult narrator disallows pathos. At times, even so, the narrative can lead precipitously from the comic to heart-rending anguish. With the choice of particularly grisly details, for instance, Momik's interpretation ceases to be amusing, and it becomes clear that the child's innocence cannot subsume, alter, or explain away stark historical facts. When the boy overhears the word *Sondercom-mando*, he assumes his father, the brave warrior, had an assistant with the strange name of Sonder. He does not recognize, as the reader painfully must, the German term for those prisoners in concentration camps responsible for operating the gas chambers and crematoria.

These examples bring to the fore a number of semiotic issues that have received extensive attention in contemporary literary criticism: the elusiveness of referentiality, the gap between world and word, and the importance of context in debate about determinacy and indeterminacy of meaning. Such concerns find natural thematic focus in narratives of childhood which attempt to present the inner workings of a child's consciousness, for young characters often bring to their encounters with language a freshness and newness of perception which results in a clash between individual imagination and conventional understandings. While textually *See Under: Love* struggles with bivocality (the co-existence of adult narrator and child character and hence, two separate frames of reference or codes of meaning), the child character within the plot action struggles with a parallel set of problems (his own transition from one immature frame of reference to another more mature one) as his semiotic initiation is turned to explicit thematic focus of the novel.

As is suggested by the trains which make sense to Momik only in connection with westerns, a fundamental aspect of the character's linguistic experience is the entrance into textuality, i.e. his interpreting of reality according to received literary models. The stories and heroes of childhood reading and movies (products, of course, of the adult imagination) are within his comprehension and form a bridge to his understanding of the adult code. They constitute for him a first inadequate step which must be overcome in order to begin to grasp what happened in the Shoah. Numerous texts have influential impact on the boy: bible tales learned at school, accounts of heroic deeds performed by Israeli soldiers, the works of Jules Verne and Arthur Conan Doyle, above all the stories written by Anshel Wasserman years ago, before the war, about "The Children of the Heart." These are a troupe of youngsters united in their fight for good against evil, and Wasserman's fiction presents an odd mixture of science fiction, boys' adventure tales, and quaintly outdated Haskalah Hebrew. Out of all this the child weaves his notions of right and wrong, courage and weakness, the traditional Jewish past, ancient glories, and, he hopes, eventually an explanation of the hidden world his parents refuse to disclose. Life lived in imitation of bookish models, the reading of reality according to internalized literary norms, is a theme widely pursued in the history of the novel that reaches back to Cervantes' *Quixote*. Here, however, an old pattern takes on new depth in its psycholinguistic verisimilitude and compelling cognitive portrait of the power of the intertext. The plausibility of the plot development, again, depends on Momik's personality. His precocious intelligence, his sensitivity, his loneliness which stems from not having siblings, and the isolation from playmates urged on him by overprotective parents—these have all made him an avid bookworm. A range of texts often converge in shaping Momik's imagination. Consider the following scene in which the child daydreams in school about an imaginary friend:

Bill calls him Johnny and the two of them speak to one another with short remarks and lots of exclamation points like the cleft in Bill's chin. Bill! Good work, Johnny! and so on. Bill has a silver star on his chest and that means he's a sheriff. Momik doesn't have a star yet. The two of them have a horse they call Blacky. Blacky understands every word and he loves to gallop wildly in the fields, but always at the end he comes back and rubs his head on Momik's chest and that feels really good, and just then Netta the teacher asks him why are you smiling Shlomo Neuman, and Momik has to hide Blacky quickly. He sometimes takes sugar from the kitchen and tries experiments to turn it into cubes like Blacky loves, but it isn't going so well, and the encyclopedia doesn't go up as far as sugar yet

and Momik is sure that if it did it would probably say "see under cubes," and in the meantime he has to find a way to feed that horse, doesn't he? In the wadi by Ein Kerem they go riding at least three times a week, returning children who have disappeared or whose parents have lost them and making an ambush like Orde Wingate for train robbers. Sometimes when Momik lies on his belly and waits, he sees over Mt. Herzl, the high chimney of the new building that they're building there and calling by the funny name Yad Vashem and says to himself that it's the smokestack of a ship floating by full of illegal immigrants from THERE who nobody wants to accept, like in the days of the British Mandate *pishakrev* and he'll save them too, somehow, with Blacky or Bill or his thoughts or his animals or the atomic reactor or Grandpa Anshel's stories about the Children of the Heart or something, and when he asked the old people what the chimney was they looked at one another and finally Munin said it's a kind of museum and Ahron Marcus who hadn't been out of his house already for several years, asked if it was an art museum and Hanna Zitrin laughed a crooked laugh and said art, sure, human art, that's what for art they have there (p. 51).

Momik here conjures for himself a friend modeled after the cowboys he idolizes, and he mixes a western setting with exemplary tales of brave illegal immigrants to Israel. To this conglomeration of ideas and allusions the boy also adds a Polish intertext—his parents' favorite curse, *pishakrev*—as well as reference to the Hebrew encyclopedia. This last text is one Momik once considered an authoritative source of knowledge about adult affairs. Now he finds it inadequate, because incomplete (it is being bought on installments), and because it divides the world into categories of significance that strike him as artificial. From these converging contexts he forges a reality of his own—an ocean in Jerusalem, as the setting for a scenario of courageous rescue which might realize his dream of liberating his parents from their perennial fears. The fantasy concludes with an abrupt entrance of the grown-up frame of reference which for Momik is not yet meaningful, but which for the reader seals the episode with a bitter reminder of atrocities lying beyond the child's knowledge.

Of particular importance among Momik's literary models is Shalom Aleichem's *Mottel*. Written at the turn of the century, this novel presents a series of adventures undertaken by a young boy from Eastern Europe as he grows up in a traditional Jewish milieu. When that world suffers economic and spiritual decline, Mottel and his family immigrate to America. Momik is fascinated by this work and by the images of small town life in Poland. The bath house, the market, the synagogue—these for him are wondrous, because inaccessible, and because he associates

them with his parents' past in the Old World. When the mother and father begin to open up and talk at length about shtetl life because of their fond memories of Shalom Aleichem's books, Momik feels he has found a key not just to information but to their hearts. He pursues the subject even more in the hope of drawing them closer to him. The parents, however, become alarmed and view his interest as an unhealthy preoccupation. The parents' reaction takes on special significance because Momik lives in the young Jewish state of the fifties, and the entire episode helps to put into relief the nature of his own environment. Israeli culture was committed to creating the image of the sabra, the strong self-reliant Jew at home in an independent nation. For a prolonged period Israelis resisted identification with the Diaspora Jew, perceived as the antithesis of the sabra heroic ideal. Those who died in the Holocaust, in particular, were seen with shame as victims who sent to their death like sheep to the slaughter.¹¹ Momik, because he is anxious to explore a past largely repressed by Israeli society, embraces Mottel and plays earnestly at being a Jew in the old Diaspora sense.

With this move the novel effects a marvelous reversal of earlier stories about childhood in Hebrew and Yiddish literature, such as Mendele's *In Those Days*, Bialik's *Aftergrowth*, and a host of others. In the world of traditional Jewish life in Europe, children from the age of three were immersed in reading the holy books. Continual study of ancestral glories and ideals helped the Jews hold onto a sense of refinement, spirituality, and chosenness despite hardship and oppression. Steeped in ancient texts and exposed to a spiritual realm far removed from the poverty and degradation of their own social circumstances, the children characters in many pieces of nineteenth century Jewish fiction find the legends and heroes of the bible and the geography of the Holy Land a more immediate reality than their actual surroundings.¹² In the case of Grossman's

11. For accounts of the initial silence in Hebrew literature and Israeli society at large on the subject of the Holocaust, see Mintz (1984), Avisar (1985), and Ezrahi (1986).

12. Mottel in some ways actually provides a departure from this model. As Dan Miron has pointed out in his essay on Sholem Aleichem's novel (1978), Mottel the character rebels against his environment: he eagerly embraces the New World and leaves the shtetl behind. Through parodies of traditional texts he also turns the world of sacred learning on its head. For Momik, all the same, Mottel functions as an embodiment of the shtetl experience. he is a throw-back to a previous era and his personal adventurousness does not divest him of cultural association with the past. His spriteliness does allow him an additional entrance into Momik's imagination, though. Grossman's character easily appropriates Shalom Aleichem's into his fantasy life, and Mottel, earlocks flying behind him, joins Bill and Johnny as they gallop across the plains.

protagonist, recovery of the past through textual study is still vital, but the situation has turned about: seeking out the culture of exile, Momik takes maps of Israel and replaces the names of Israeli cities with the names of Polish towns. The past he feels he must revive in order to understand himself is the very realm of humiliation, suffering, and eventually annihilation that his earlier counterparts in Jewish literature were intent on escaping.

With Momik's absorption in Shalom Aleichem there begins the breakdown that finally overcomes him. As has been the novelistic tradition since the *Quixote*, this character, too, discovers that reality exceeds the narrative conventions or understandings he has gleaned from the past. Momik eventually realizes that all the previous literary models leave him dissatisfied and cannot provide him the answers to his questions. Driven to seek out more and more facts, he finally consults Bella, who is also a survivor but not so unwilling to speak about the Nazis. Through his conversations with her and through research at the library, the boy comes closer and closer to a detailed picture of the Shoah. In this way he approaches the adult field of knowledge, but the collapsing of the two spheres of understanding—his and theirs—leads finally to Momik's emotional collapse.

First, he discovers that the truth he sought is not one that can be mastered and rationally controlled. Momik set out with the conviction that by sheer intelligence and orderly, methodical strategy he would unravel all the mysteries and trap the Nazi beast. To this end he kept a notebook, recording all his spying activities and his new-found information about the land of THERE. Having decided to be a writer like Sabba Anshel, he also determined to write an encyclopedia—that is, a comprehensive, exhaustive account—of all significant facts about the secret world. Matters evolve to the contrary, though. As the boy begins to get inklings of the horror the Shoah wrought, he himself starts to act more and more irrational. Profoundly disturbed, he becomes obsessed, stops eating, stops sleeping, and starts to abuse the animals in his cellar. Denying them food and water, he aims to infuriate them and so force the Nazi beast to reveal itself. In this process he makes the important discovery that he, like his parents' persecutors, is capable of cruelty in the name of an allegedly higher purpose (here, to find answers to his questions and save his family). As a result he experiences the troubled relationship of victimizers to victims. He fears the creatures he torments, for their great hatred and anger toward him imbues them with strength. Afraid of them, he has in effect become a captive of his own cruelty.

While his maturation until now has brought to the surface cognizance of a number of issues—the family dynamics, the relationship between heroism and pity, Israeliness and Jewish identity—at the end Momik has gone beyond experiences that can be explored or understood through language, reason, or scientific procedure. Matters come to a head in the last pages of the text when the boy hits upon the idea of precipitating a climax by bringing the beast its favorite prey: Jews. He senses that despite all his research and experimental role-playing, he himself is not authentically enough of a Jew to make the beast reveal itself. When he lures the poor, half-crazed survivors from the neighborhood down to his secret lair, they find the walls covered with pictures he has drawn of death trains, hangings, mass graves, and crematoria. There, amidst the animals crying out, flapping, and beating at their cages, the poor old people dimly surmise the terrible battle Momik has been fighting within himself. They can only murmur with inarticulate pity while the boy falls to the floor and in a strange, wordless, inhuman scream urges the beast to come out.

In this moment of breakdown it is not words but pictures, silence, and desperate irrational acts that prevail. This is a denouement which portrays the failure of language and rationality. The ultimate rapprochement of child and adult perception results, moreover, in the annihilation of the child's voice. Only a single paragraph remains in this section of the novel, and it is one restricted almost entirely to authorial reportage. The passage informs the reader that the family sends Momik to a school for troubled children and that Sabba Anshel wanders off one day, never to return. With this, both *histoire* and *discours* are finished. The narrative's prime object of scrutiny—the child as a voice of innocence—is gone, and the narrative itself as a superimposition of voices also comes to a close.

This ending, which emphasizes the failure of language at the level of narrated events, is not itself a failed discourse. It reenacts and so alerts the reader to an essential problem facing the author from the outset at the level of narration: how to make sense of the Holocaust, how to give articulate expression to something so overwhelmingly horrific that it threatens to consume any who contemplate it too directly. Confronting the horror proves too much for the character in the story, but the adult writer in a sense succeeds. Of necessity he cannot fully convey the terrors of the Nazi period nor impose meaning on what happened then, but he does dramatize what is so problematic about his role as an artist. The

first section in this way serves as the point of departure for the rest of the novel, which grows out of this initial formulation of artistic dilemma. The remaining sections of the work, in various experimental ways, wrestle with the issue of mimesis and the representation of the Holocaust. Momik becomes a writer, and all that follows can be seen as emerging out of his early experience. At this juncture the narrative shifts away from the childhood of the protagonist and from attempts to capture a child's voice, yet the later sections all explore ramifications of issues raised in Part I and bear the imprint of Momik's early experiences with Sabba Anshel and the Nazi beast.

In Part II the protagonist, now grown up and called Shlomo, spins a yarn about the Polish-Jewish writer Bruno Schulz. In this tale Bruno is not murdered by the Nazis, as has been recorded by historical accounts. Instead, he is transformed into a fish in the depths of the sea. Such a fiction reflects the artist's wish to discover a world of imagination that will allow survival beyond death and an escape from the brutal facts of atrocity. Significantly, at a critical moment in the sea, Shlomo envisages Bruno as a curious child/man, ever capable of the fantasy and wonder usually associated only with the very young. Part II then presents an imaginative recreation of Anshel Wasserman's experience in the concentration camp. In this avowedly fictional version of his life, Anshel cannot die. Gas cannot harm him, bullets do not destroy him, and Wasserman spends his time recounting adventure tales about the Children of the Heart to the SS officer. Eventually the hardened Nazi is moved by these stories to a new and humane compassion. The final section of *ʿAyyēn ʿerek ʾahāḇāh* is set up as an encyclopedia which documents the twenty-four-hour life of a baby, a character out of Wasserman's stories. An outgrowth of Momik's early project of writing an encyclopedia, this last chapter, like the preceding ones, also turns to children and the world of childhood. It does so, like the other chapters, as a way of introducing speculation on the power of the imagination to grapple with the unimaginable—to combat it, understand it, survive it, transform it, or produce from it renewed artistic vision.

Each section creates a complicated new set of quandaries related to these issues and raises questions about the connections between the four disjunct chapters of the novel.¹³ All four sections, however, revolve

13. In his review of *ʿAyyēn ʿerek ʾahāḇāh* after the novel first appeared, Shaked (1986) succinctly analyzed the relationship of each of the parts of the text with the central thematic tension between imagination and horror. For a discussion of *See Under: Love*, Part II in comparison with Cynthia Ozick's *The Messiah of Stockholm*, a Jewish-American novel about the second generation to the Holocaust, see Sokoloff (1988).

around a central set of fundamental tensions—innocence/brutality, wonder/knowledge of evil—and Part I is instrumental in laying the groundwork for the later perorations on these matters. “Momik” provides the dramatic framework that lends the other narratives coherence (since they are all to be understood as texts produced by the writer Shlomo, a man still haunted in adulthood by the preoccupation with the Shoah which marked his younger days). Part I likewise sets out the first fundamental opposition between naiveté and horror, as well as presents for the first time the inquiring mind which tries to overcome silence and to find new ways of speaking about the unspeakable in order to penetrate its mystery. Finally, the artistic experimentation of the last sections (each of which deserves detailed scrutiny in its own right and is only alluded to here), together with the very disjunction of these texts, suggests effort: it is not easy to write about the Holocaust. Amassing and abandoning a spectrum of narrative possibilities, the author strains to reach beyond more ordinary fictional strategies in accordance with a basic conviction: that conventional language can respond only inadequately to unthinkable tragedy. This matter of language is the very issue brought to the fore in Part I of *See Under: Love*. There Grossman struggles with the artifice of imagined child language and dualities of narrative stance—in short, with the whole problem of narratability in texts featuring a child’s inner life—to confront and throw into relief another all pervasive issue informing his novel as a whole: the difficulty of narration and of adopting an interpretive stance in fictional treatments of the Holocaust.

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